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TRUTH, REALITY, AND REVELATION

PROFESSOR HENRY S. NASH, D.D.
Episcopal Theological School, Cambridge, Mass.

It is proposed to handle, in four short articles, the fact and problem of authority. To this end, we shall carry our question into the light of that historical knowledge and interpretation of the Holy Scriptures which the studies of our time are giving us. It may seem like an impertinence offered to a supreme subject, to treat it in so brief a space. But there are compensations. The very fact that we have so little space at our disposal may force us to a clearer definition. A little straight thinking is better than a multitude of thoughts.

There are sound reasons for believing that the attempt is timely. In the first place, the Christian churches are nearer one another than ever before. While corporate unity is a long way off, there is a growing catholicity of feeling and desire in which Christians of all names have a share. Common labor for social betterment is bringing the various types of Christian consciousness into such neighborly relations that it is harder than it once was to emphasize differences, and the result is that our differences become more reasonable and open-minded. Furthermore, Christianity is entering into the great debate with the world's religions. To win, we must bring out the distinguishing qualities of our own religion, put the pith and marrow of the Christian consciousness in clear light. In doing that, we must needs send some of our differences to the rear. We are learning to set an increasing value on the motives and actions of Christians of other names than ours.

In addition to these conscious motives, forces deeper than consciousness are at work. The logic of history, which is the will of God, is knitting the nations closer together. World-trade and world-travel are rapidly creating a world-consciousness into which the provincial and parochial elements within our differences are being drawn, to lose themselves and disappear. A mighty tide in the affairs of mankind, with or without our will, bears us all on.

America finds herself in a situation peculiarly representative. Our vast democracy forms an immense, an almost irresistible solvent. For example, our sister church, the Church of Rome, in spite of her tremendous capacity for resisting change and her incomparable machinery for suppressing variations in doctrine, is deeply affected by America. American Catholicism differs mightily from Spanish or Italian Catholicism. Of course this social and religious solvent has some bad results, because in a great train of consequences evil always travels with the good. Loose thinking on vital questions widely prevails. Indifference parades in the dress of real tolerance, that mutual tolerance of Christians who believe that principles of supreme value are at stake in their differences. But the good outweighs the evil. Bitterness disappears in proportion as men rub elbows with each other. If we differ, we do not forget the parliamentary law that guides a real debate; we remember that our opponent will have his turn on the floor.

In the second place, the critical or historical knowledge of the Scriptures is insuring to them the right to speak their own language. We are outgrowing the habit, fixed by the Christian usage of many centuries, of making the text of Holy Scripture a place of deposit for all the opinions and beliefs of the churches. We can already, in some measure, think with the men of the Bible more truly than our forefathers were able to do. And the longer the spirit of reverent criticism is at work in the church, the more will this ability grow.

The most notable result of this historical study is that the Old Testament is regaining its individuality. When the Catholic Church bound the Old and New Testaments together, to make a single Bible, she accompanied the action with a view of inspiration that obliterated the difference between the New Testament and the Old. The Old was leveled up to the New. But historical study is restoring to the Old Testament its individuality. It is taking its place as a book of mediation between the religion of Jesus and primitive religion. And so it is acquiring an immense value for the student of religious origins, and an equally great value for those who seek to discover the nature of our religion in its growth. Genetic study is a matter of course today in every field where vital thinking is done. Thanks to criticism, the

Old Testament gives us the material for laboratory work of the highest order.

And this for the reason that the Old Testament is free from the specializations which are so characteristic of our time and of our method of thought. We parcel out experiences and sometimes pigeon-hole the parcels, with the result that simplicity and comprehensiveness become mutually exclusive virtues. But the Old Testament does not know our specializations. It presents a field of experience as free from fences as a western prairie in its native state. It does not know our fixed distinction between the natural and the supernatural, a distinction which, when it goes to seed, gives us a conception of miracles that, in Delitzsch's words, amounts to "drilling holes in nature." The Old Testament thinker has a single and indivisible world of experience, every part of which is under the creative power of God. Nor does the Old Testament know our distinction between church and state. Now, great as is the value of that distinction when it is used as a subordinate principle, if taken as both starting-point and goal it breeds endless confusion of thought. Nor does the Old Testament know our problem of authority. Authority does not become a problem until knowledge becomes a problem. And when knowledge has become a problem, revelation also becomes a problem. And the problem, long lived with, distorts the nature and narrows the scope of revelation viewed as a vital process. But the facts of revelation and authority are present in the Old Testament, and present in splendid strength. Our specializations complicate our thinking, confuse our logic, even split up and enfeeble our sense of moral obligation. But the Old Testament is as simple as Homer. The thinking of inspired men recorded in it sees life steadily and sees it whole.

In order that we may think together from the start and put our space to the best use, let us propose four decisive questions: First, what is revelation? second, what is law? third, what is salvation? fourth, what is the word of God and what the nature and methods of the society or church that administers the Word of God to the needs of mankind?

The general title of our study is revelation and authority. It aims to point at the outset to the goal of our thinking. It is this: there is no process that can bring our minds to rest and give temper and edge

to our wills, unless somehow divine revelation is the animating and unifying element within the process.

The title of our initial study is, truth, reality, and revelation. This special title seeks to serve the general title by bringing out the nature of the reality that gives us saving conviction and certitude and the necessary quality and method of the revelation whereby the divine reality speaks home to our hearts.

The moment we utter the word "authority" a dragon's brood of difficulties and complications springs out of the ground to assail us. Locke in the *Epistle Dedicatory*, before his great *Essay on the Human Understanding*, has said :

To break in upon the Sanctuary of Vanity and Ignorance, will be, I suppose, some service to Human Understanding. Though so few are apt to think they deceive or are deceived in the Use of Words; or that the Language of the Sect they are of has any Faults in it, which ought to be examined or corrected; yet I hope I shall be pardoned, if I have in the third Book dwelt long on this Subject, and endeavored to make it so plain, that neither the Inveterateness of the Mischief, nor the Prevalency of the Fashion, shall be an excuse for those who will not take care about the Meaning of their own Words, and will not suffer the Significancy of their Expressions to be enquired into.

This is sound and weighty counsel. We are the slaves of our own terms. The word "authority" has so many bearings, such varied uses, that a consistent use of it may easily seem impossible. Authority ranges from the right of the commonwealth to build a prison and shut up inside it the people who break the law, to the endearing authority of the truth that sets us free. Is there any common quality in all the forms of authority ?

Yes, it is the assertion of the right of way for superior experience. Even when authority seems to rest wholly on mere force, the weight of the heaviest fist, the force of the strongest battalion, no solid and enduring base of authority is found until force associates itself with experiences of common and enduring good, with common gains of law and order secured at great cost and therefore rightly defended by force against him who, for a private and temporary gain, would cast them away. Enduring authority rests upon superior experience.

All forms of authority, in the last analysis, rest on this foundation. Superior experience organizes its gains and to insure them makes its appeal to men through instruction, through illumination, and, higher

motives failing, through force. The state commits hideous blunders, inflicts brutalizing punishments, goes into needless and awful wars. The church has her full share of hideous blundering. She has sometimes made Caesar the master of Christ. She has made the sword an easy and luxurious substitute for the cross. But at the heart of the nation, ennobling its existence and endowing it with the right to go hopefully, though blunderingly, into a larger future, is the supreme experience of justice and the common welfare. And at the heart of the church, giving her unconquerable confidence in her own future, is the supreme experience of life in its greatest depth and dignity.

Authority must ever rest on a superior experience of truth. But truth has a wide and diversified range of meanings. There is the truth about the locomotive, the truth about the law of gravitation, the truth about citizenship, the truth about motherhood, and the truth about God. This, then, is the first characteristic of truth which we must keep in mind. It is not found on a dead level.

Another characteristic is that truth depends for its vitality, its power to propagate and preserve itself, upon reality. Sometimes skepticism sets itself up as the ultimate truth. But the price it pays for finality is divorce from reality. A gulf opens between that part of the universe which is inside the mind and the part which is outside the mind. No bridge existing, the mind feeds on itself and dies. But skepticism such as this, while sometimes historically necessary, is necessary in the same sense that disease is necessary; it is not consistent with health. Truth as an ideal, giving the mind of man a career and laying it upon a sacred obligation, draws its power and appeal from reality.

With every one of our great terms and conceptions we fence in some portion of reality, inclosing it in order to cultivate it. Perhaps by and by the fence, taking itself too seriously, becomes a nuisance. The reality it incloses, absent minded regarding the outlying infinite, tries to enslave the mind that tills it. Then the fence must come down. Established opinions and inherited convictions give way. But it is the pressure of reality upon truth which causes them to give way. When our conceptions are forced to waver, when our definitions break down, it is to the end that we may be led into conceptions more inclusive of reality, into definitions which are freed from the impertinences of

finality through a deepening intimacy with the infinite and the eternal.

Let us now shape for ourselves a working hypothesis regarding the nature and ground of authority. Using the word "revelation" in the widest sense, we say that authority rests in every case on revelation. It is the feel of reality that makes truth compelling and gives it the right to take itself with all seriousness. The higher the level of truth, the more evidently is its essential quality due to a reality that invades consciousness. Within all truth is the feel of reality. Authority being the insistence by superior experience on its right of way, the experience in question, when challenged, must fall back upon the reality that invades consciousness and flushes it with the feeling of power and competence. So alone a winged word is born that can either cross the space between individual and individual, or the gulf that separates generation from generation.

Let us now note the first decisive question which we have proposed to ourselves—What is revelation? Our attempt to think clearly on the final question of our religion must start here. All is at stake in this single point. The very soul of Christianity is in it. If we twist our thinking on this matter, all the thinking that comes after is sure to be crooked. How must we think, in order to be consistent Christians—how must we think regarding the quality and method of divine revelation?

The word revelation is used today in many loose ways. Almost anything that comes on the mind with a rush of sensation and emotion is called a revelation. But looseness of terms is sometimes necessary to correct excessive rigor of definition. For many centuries the Christian church has been dominated by a conception of revelation which grew up naturally and inevitably when the ancient church established herself in the Roman Empire, but which is quite out of keeping with the needs and experience of our time. The Christian church had to set herself against a persecuting heathen state. She had to classify and canonize her scriptures. In so doing she drew a just and necessary distinction between the truth of Greek philosophy and the truth of prophetic revelation. But the strain of the times forced her farther than the scriptures themselves demanded. Culture and reason and law were set off on one side as belonging to a profane

world. On the other side the scriptures were set off as constituting a sacred body of truth. And inasmuch as profane truth was a kind of truth essential to the layman's world, it was necessary to give sacred truth into the keeping of a separate order of men, the clergy.

That division and partition of truth having lasted for centuries, and the word revelation having been shut up to the truth called sacred, it was inevitable that when in modern times the wall of division was broken down, the great word should be turned loose and wander wide. But the loosest usage of it is bringing us gain. Truth, reality, revelation—we have learned that these terms cannot be separated without serious injury to life.

All forms of beauty rest on revelation. Beauty, to be noble, must be convincing. And the convincing quality of beauty is due to the conviction, given to us in the presence of the beautiful, that reality is at one with our purpose. There is no bottom or top to the beautiful. There is no inside or outside. Reality and appearance are one. The world of fractional meanings and halting purposes, where we spend so much of our time, is left behind. In a deep and uplifting satisfaction the restless heart of man finds temporary rest.

All forms of truth rest on revelation. The mind of man cannot take to itself the credit for truth, else the soul of truth dies, its holy and consecrating quality perishes. It is the invasive quality of an infinite reality that gives truthfulness to truth. Let us listen to Tyndall. Bringing his noble essay on the scientific use of the imagination to a close, he says:

“Two things,” said Immanuel Kant, “fill me with awe: the starry heavens and the sense of moral responsibility in man.” And in his hours of health and strength and sanity, when the stroke of action has ceased and the pause of reflection has set in, the scientific investigator finds himself overshadowed by the same awe. Breaking contact with the hampering details of earth, it associates him with a power which gives fulness and tone to his existence, but which he can neither analyze nor comprehend.

Tyndall's agnosticism is the child of his environment. But his testimony to the inherent connection between truth and revelation is the testimony of a soul naturally Christian.

What is revelation? What is the track followed by the mind that the true God chose to be the medium of his self-revelation? How does the consciousness of man approach God? Where are the final

and piercing questions touching the innermost meaning of reality to be put, so put that a convincing answer becomes possible? And what is the channel of expression which the innermost and ultimate reality requires?

The range of reality is illimitable. The reality of a physical fact is one thing. The reality of an ennobling memory is a different and more intimate thing. How and where do we get the deepest reality? Where and how does that reality give itself to us with convincing power? And when the revelation is given, how is it administered to meet the deepest needs of mankind?

We go to the Old Testament to seek the logic of life, to find the path that experience must follow, when life is taken in its full scope and obligation, if it is to come to a great and ennobling end. How, then, is human experience, regarded as a whole, to be made sane and competent? How shall it reach and keep unity, coherence, and meaning? In no other way than this: the reality of things must answer to the deepest needs of experience. Moreover, the reality of things must not be thought of as holding itself aloof, passively waiting for the human mind to investigate and explore it. To think of the matter so would be to throw away all we have learned regarding truth and reality and revelation. No, the inmost reality of things must set into and invade human consciousness. So alone can saving unity of mind and purpose be attained.

God reveals himself to the prophets as the one true God. But the prophet who receives the revelation lives and dies within the life of the chosen nation. Revelation is not a process which, in its perfect forms, takes place in the cell of the monk or the study of the philosopher. Revelation and the nation's history are inseparable. For a splendid span of a thousand years, from the Exodus to the destruction and restoration of the nation, this inspired logic of human experience runs its course. To Moses, leading his people out of slavery, God reveals himself by his new name (Ex., chap. 3). In the stress and strain of politics at Jerusalem, God discloses himself to Isaiah as exalted above the plans and desires of the nation, while ruling and guiding them (Isa., chap. 6). In the thick darkness of the Exile He reveals himself to the great unknown prophet as the creative unity that insures the future of an apparently hopeless people (Isa., chaps. 40-46). Ezekiel

sees the creative spirit carrying a dead nation forth into a glorious resurrection (Ezek., chap. 37).

In all deep and abiding experience unity must somehow be reached and held. John Stuart Mill, speaking in the name of science, has defined the belief in the unity of nature as meaning that there is nothing in the constitution of the universe that can bring our minds to permanent intellectual confusion. Aristotle, in the name of philosophy, girding himself to the tasks of reason, is led into the ennobling conviction of the divine unity. Wherever human experience has organized itself on a broad and enduring basis, assembled the main elements in the life of mankind and in some degree co-ordinated them, there some form of monotheism invariably appears. Professor William James has recently said that polytheism may be conceived as a possible point of view. But this is thrown out rather than thought through. It is an impression, as its author candidly confesses, not an enduring conviction. And it cannot hold the will of man upright against the pressure of the ultimate problems of life.

The belief in the divine unity is essential to life, if, after history has laid upon man's will the final obligations, life is to be lived nobly. But while the divine unity was revealed to the Hindoo mystic and to the Greek philosopher, the quality of the revelation differed profoundly from the revelation given to the Hebrew prophets. The Hindoo mystic annihilated the world of the family and the nation in order to bring his thought to a point and be at peace with himself. The Greek philosopher blazed a trail from the confused impressions of experience to the saving unities of reason. But his reason carried him into positions where history lost primary value and meaning.

But God revealed himself to the prophet in the depth and pressure of the nation's needs. His war-cry to his nation is, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is one God" (Deut. 6:4). The divine unity binds a man and his neighbor into an indissoluble unity. "And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might" (Deut. 6:5). "Thou shalt not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself: I am the Lord" (Lev. 19:18).

The creative unity of God delivers the true Israelite from moral skepticism. The genius and authority of Prophetism say to the

nation: "For this commandment which I command you this day, it is not too hard for thee, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go up for us into heaven, and bring it unto us, and make us to hear it, that we may do it? Neither is it beyond the sea, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it unto us, and make us to hear it, that we may do it? But the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it" (Deut. 30:11-14). The Word of God is indeed addressed to the soul of man and gives to our inmost consciousness radiant joy and peace. It is addressed to reason, giving to the mind unity and abiding mental satisfaction. But it goes through reason into deeper regions of our own nature. It addresses itself to our sense of moral obligation, training and perfecting it. The Old Testament is the record of the education of human conscience. History is not to the prophet what it was to Aristotle, a poorly constructed drama, full of meaningless episodes. It is a divine drama, with a moral end and quality. God educates and moralizes the chosen nation. His unity is the root of the nation's unity and integrity. His creative holiness is the standing-ground of the nation's confidence in its own future.

Standing on this ground, the prophet, the inspired Israelite, becomes the fearless critic of all the evils of the nation's life. Elijah, made strong by the vision of the unseen, single handed confronts a kingdom (I Kings, chaps. 17-19). Isaiah faces the nation without fear, and uncovers its moral nakedness (Isa., chaps. 1-7). Amos, an inspired farm hand, faces monarchy and priesthood together. The current forms of religion, no less than the established political and commercial methods, are unsparingly criticized (Hosea, Amos, Jeremiah, Micah). The creative holiness of God equips prophets and critics who will not let men lay their heads on the pillow of custom, no matter how ancient, or of tradition, no matter how hallowed.

Here, then, in the spiritual laboratory of the Old Testament, we shape our conception of revelation. We no longer dream of confining the great word "revelation" to the Scriptures. It is a term which the mature stages of religious experience all over the world lay claim to, and to which they have a divine right. We can safely give up the forms in which our forefathers expressed their belief in revelation.

Indeed, we must give up the forms if we are to retain the substance. God reveals himself in the deep of all glorifying human wants. But prophetism alone gives us the clear and coherent logic of revelation. Here, in the deep of the supreme moral need, the nation's need of righteousness, in the place where conscience takes on itself the full and complete obligations of life, God reveals himself in his saving and creative unity.

Here, then, the Christian consciousness starts. This is the quarry out of which it has been hewn. In our thinking on the problem of authority we shall need to remind ourselves constantly of this central and controlling fact. We will not permit any traditional conception of scriptural and ecclesiastical authority to put upon a side track that conception of revelation which the historical study of the Old Testament has given us.